

Relations between blacks and whites in faulkner's literature



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Part of an old southern family from Mississippi, William Faulkner chooses to inscribe in his writing the culture of his white heritage: the stories, myths and nightmares of the South. He particularly selects to portray the fall of the old aristocracy and its interaction with the people in the imaginary town of Jefferson. He also engages his fictive world with a moving, often tragic, awareness of the impact of racism and prejudice against Black Americans. Faulkner's writing not only reproduces the social and political institutions based on racism in the South, it frequently analyzes that racism, demonstrating its damaging impact on both races. Some of his chief concerns were the nature of evil and guilt in the chaotic relationships between blacks and whites, the resentment that they encounter against each other and the inexplicable attraction that often result from it. Faulkner's black characters in particular have difficult times dealing with all these issues that take them places where they question their true identities and the meaning of their life. At the end, most of these characters' actions and lives are the result of the way they are treated according to the color of their skin. African Americans characters are a regular presence in Faulkner's stories, even if they represent stereotypes: the tragic mulatto, the Mammy, the faithful retainer, the rebellious marginal man. Faulkner's black characters were not written purely from personal contact and observation of life in the environs of Jefferson, Mississippi. He alludes to and perpetuates well-established myths of black identity and culture. Faulkner, born and raised in Mississippi in the early twentieth century has the point of view of the typical white man who sees blacks as primitive and dependant of white superiority. But at the same time he intends to stay neutral and only give the point of view of the inhabitants of Jefferson while telling the stories. The imaginary

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town is filled with atypical personalities who at one time or another find themselves the center of attention because of what they are: black, or “Negro” (the term Negro has a negative connotation and induces the reader to visualize the situation the way it was back in those days). The whites in the old-fashioned South aristocracy castigated blacks as worthless and never treated them as equal. Faulkner grew up in that state of mind “Faulkner struggled with this culture and this heritage [of racism and violence against blacks] all his life” and therefore transfers it to his writing. 1 The theme of racial prejudice is brought up in several of Faulkner’s works: in *Light in August* (1932) the prejudice is shown to be most destructive when it is internalized in the character of Joe Christmas who believes that one of his parent was Negro; in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) Charles Bon is rejected by his father and brother because of his mixed blood. However, Faulkner’s most outspoken moral evaluation of the relationship and the problems between blacks and whites is to be found in *Intruder In the Dust* (1948), the story of Lucas Beauchamp who is falsely accused of murder. In the novel *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), the principal black character is Dilsey Gibson, mother of three children, who has been a faithful domestic servant and “Mammy” to the white Compson family for thirty years. She is strong and independent but retains her fidelity to the Compson family. The characters range from the traditional southern Mammy figure or the Negro help working in the white Masters plantation, to characters with a higher position that want to relate to these aristocratic southern families and want to be treated as equal.

Faulkner’s black characters identify themselves with the way they are treated by whites, and the interaction between the two races is described as if everything that matter in the South involved around the subject. Racism
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was predominant at that time in America and was even more severe in the South, black lynching was an everyday occurrence and as the Jim Crow laws came to personify the system of a government promoting racial oppression and segregation in the United States. The Jim Crow system emerged towards the end of the historical period called Reconstruction, during which Congress had enacted laws designed to order relations between southern whites and newly freed blacks. Southern whites felt profoundly threatened by increasing claims by African American for social equality and economic opportunity. In reaction, white controlled state legislatures passed laws designed to rob blacks of their civil rights. In his novels, Faulkner goes beyond that idea and chooses to show the relationships between blacks and whites in the most intimate and profound ways. He takes his characters places where the complexity of their identity alters who they are and their relations with others. In the novel *Light in August* Joe Christmas, who believes to be mixed blood, is unable to bear the struggle of his individuality and comes to perform the most horrific acts: he has a shocking way of treating women, he either beats them or treats them like prostitutes and even kill them " she was watching his face and began to move backwards slowly before him, staring at him, her face draining, her mouth open to scream, then she did scream"(225); he doesn't have respect for anybody not even the church " we could see brother Bedenberry talking to him, trying to pacify him quiet, and him jerking at brother Bedenberry and slapping his face with his hand"(323). His constant preoccupation is his racial uncertain identity and he isolates himself because he refuses to accept either of the two racial categories he could belong to. Nevertheless Joe Christmas knows how to take advantage of the situation and exploit it: after having sex with a

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prostitute he tells her that he is black because he knows that she thinks that a black costumer is beneath her and won't take his money or he tells white men that he is black just to provoke them into a fight. Charles Bon, in the novel *Absalom, Absalom!* doesn't resemble the character of Joe Christmas. He doesn't seem to be bothered by the fact that he is mixed blood (maybe because he knows it for a fact) and chooses to go Jefferson with his friend Henry Sutpen (who is actually his half brother) to meet his father. Once in the Sutpen's house, Charles doesn't reveal his real identity and enjoys the treatments given to a white man until the truth finally comes out and he is rejected by what he thought would be his family and killed by his brother who couldn't accept the idea of him being in part a black man. In this story, the character himself is not subject to a change but those bound to him are. In *Intruder in the Dust* Lucas isolates himself, identifying with neither the black nor the white community of Yoknapatawpha. Nonetheless, he is connected to both: he has inherited land and three thousand dollars from the McCaslin estate, yet white society and the law consider him a black. Quite willing to ignore this racial reality, he reinvents himself: independent, prideful, and contemptuous of all others. Part of the process of rejecting his racial background and patrimony required that he rename himself, which he did in a way that echoes Faulkner's own change of name for independence from his family. Faulkner changed the spelling of his name from Faulkner; Lucas Beauchamp was born Lucius Quentus Carothers McCaslin Beauchamp. By establishing Lucas's independence from both races Faulkner avoids the perhaps impossible task of depicting the complexities of black society, as Richard King puts it "Faulkner's creation of Lucas was artistically and morally daring for a white writer, Southerner or not." ²Another aspect of the <https://assignbuster.com/relations-between-blacks-and-whites-in-faulkners-literature/>

relationship between blacks and whites analyzed in Faulkner's novels is the intimate and sexual relations. Inter racial relationships at that time weren't even an option, not in the open at least. The fact that some of the characters are mixed blood implies that one of their parents is white and every single time it is the father. It appears that it was more acceptable for a white man to have sexual relations with a black woman while for a white woman to have relations with a black man was shameful, even for a prostitute.

Southern racial distinction allowed white men to use black women as sexual objects but a black man could be hanged immediately if he even spoke familiarly with a white woman. But there is the exception of Joanna Burden, character in *Light in August*, she is Joe Christmas lover and during their lovemaking she murmurs " Negro! Negro! Negro!"(260) her sexual passion seems to be directed to the racial aspect of the situation. " Within six months she was corrupted" (260) this is refers to Joanna Burden's passion for Joe Christmas, but could that be the reason why white women were not allowed to have sexual relations with a black men, because they might like it? Men in another end did not think twice before having sex with a black woman, a multitude of Faulkner's characters have offspring who are the result of a relation with a black woman. As young as fourteen years old, Christmas and a few friends were taking turns in having sex with a black girl; it could be for proof of superiority that white men would have sex with black women or it could also be that they associate them with feminine qualities. In the short story *That Evening Sun* Faulkner takes the issue even further as Nancy (a black servant in the Compson's house) is pregnant with another man's child, a white Baptist named Stovall. As a result, her husband Jesus is " waiting outside of the cabin to slit her throat" because he cannot bear the idea of his

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wife having an other man's child, even worse, a white man's child. *Go Down, Moses* (1942) is the direct sequel to *Absalom, Absalom!*, it is Faulkner's second most painful and agonizing novel because it shows the consequences to man and culture when the present is built on a past of miscegenation. The novel, named for a gospel song that is a cry for a rescuer for blacks, traces a new aristocratic family on a plantation in Yoknapatawpha, but the McCaslins, like the Sutpens, are guilty of miscegenation. In fact, when Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin impregnates his own daughter by a slave woman, the girl's mother commits suicide in an icy creek at Christmas. Through his writing, Faulkner tries to analyze and understand the nature of human beings, how can they be so similar and so different at the same time? Black or white, people respond a certain way mostly to protect themselves, the behavior is then learned and repeated over and over again, generations after generations. Nancy's remark (*That Evening Sun*) "I aint nothing but a nigger ...it aint none of my fault", expose the way she has internalized the condemnation to such an extent that she really believes that she is without value. Even when they try to alienate themselves from each other, blacks and whites always find themselves on the same path and even if they fight against, or for, what they are at the end they are fighting for the same thing: the acceptance and the acknowledgment that they matter. Faulkner struggled with this culture, and this heritage all his life. In his last years, he spoke up in newspaper letters against the punishment of blacks, which he thought was excessive. He lost the friendships he had and the recognition of his own brother and much of his family. At the same time, he wrote in *Ebony* magazine of all places, the leading black national magazine published in the North, an argument that precisely echoes Ike McCaslin in "Delta Autumn": <https://assignbuster.com/relations-between-blacks-and-whites-in-faulkners-literature/>

he argued that the South should go slowly and independently on matters of race, taking perhaps a hundred, perhaps a thousand years to assimilate everyone into a single race. 3NOTES1 "Faulkner and Racism" Critical Essays on William Faulkner . ed. Arthur Kinney 265. 2 ." Lucas Beauchamp and William Faulkner: Blood Brothers," Critical Essays on William Faulkner, ed. Kinney 234. 3 "Faulkner and Racism" Critical Essays on William Faulkner, ed. Kinney 265-278. BIBLIOGRAPHYBinley, Leslie. "Literary Pilgrimages: William Faulkner". The New York Times May 10 1998: 23-24. Cowley, Malcolm. The portable Faulkner. Viking. Boston, 1986. Faulker, William. Absalom, Absalom! New York. Vintage International Ed. 1990. Faulker, William. Light in August . New York. Vintage International Ed. 1992. Hamblin, Robert W. and Charles Peek. "A William Faulkner Encyclopedia". Questia Online Library. Greenwood Press, 1999. Kinney, Arthur F. "Faulkner and Racism". Critical Essay on William Faulkner Connotations 3. 3 (1993-94): 265-278..